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Co-produced autoethnography in leadership research – impetus for methods at the margins


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Right message, wrong colours

- “A consequence of the dominance of rationality is that leadership has been cast in largely behavioural and structural hues almost devoid of any consideration of human interiority” (English, 2008: 96)
- Interiority? Human *being* e.g. self as system subject to nature or self as subject to its own volition



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Dark arts



- *“...a more complex model suits the realities of leadership... as well as having the potential to reveal [the] ‘dark secrets’ in leadership preparation...”*
(English, 2008: 96)

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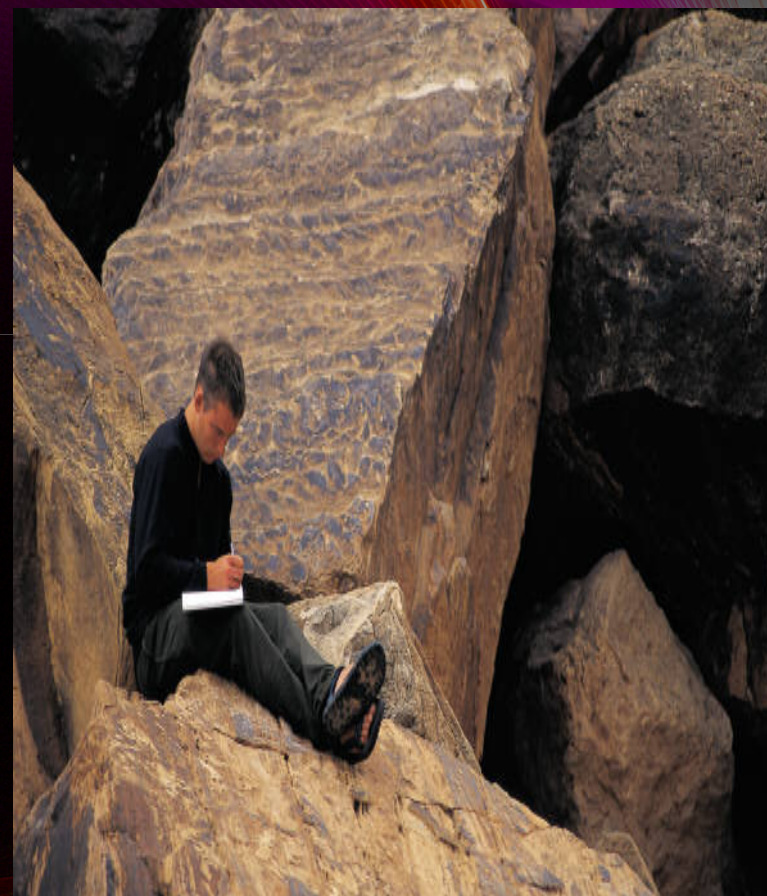
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“Frightening the horses”

- *“So here I was first day back as the new chief operating officer. Do I have to dress differently, perhaps act or behave differently in some way? What will the issues be and how should I handle them?”*

James Stewart, Director

- The innocuous experiences when highlighted lead to meaning beyond headlines and to the ‘dark matter’.
- Ethnography! HALLELUJAH! But on the margin, peripheral to the mainstream. Bad for career?!



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The Underground M[e]n

- *"They may be any age up to sixty or even sixty-five, but when they are black and naked they all look alike. ... You can never forget that spectacle once you have seen it - the line of bowed, kneeling figures, sooty black all over, driving their huge shovels under the coal with stupendous force and speed."* Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier*
- Few people outside of Yorkshire and Lancashire in 1936 knew the conditions of mining communities until Orwell's work of ethnography
- *"I am a sick man. I am a spiteful man. I am a most unpleasant man."*
The Underground Man in Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*
- A truthful voice in Industrial society?
- How much does society value the voice of the individual?
- How much will leadership and society benefit from discovering the 'truthful voice' of its leaders?

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Layers of understanding

- *First-rate ethnography... seldom fails to offer up a number of critical, ironic insights into the world studied" (Van Maanen, 2011: 229).*
- *"no direct access to truth..." (p.227) but "Ethnography shines a light, sometimes a very strange one, on what people are up to..." (p. 229).*
- Situated curriculum
- Co-produced with ethnographer
- Leading to patterns or resemblances but not objective realities ('family resemblances' Wittgenstein)



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Inquiry at the margins



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- How is James becoming a strategic leader? Where is he acquiring knowledge-in-action?
- Leader central to narrative plot
- Revealing complex web of relationships and activities
- Reliability anchored through text being connected life
- Verisimilitude 'evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is life-like, believable, and possible' (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 751).

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And to ethnography



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- Ethnography offers insights into complex social processes.
- Understanding the complex situation from the perspective of serial narratives revealing the 'dark matter' of leadership practice
- Thin descriptions of 'real time' practice versus thick descriptions of observation
- Auto-ethnography invites the practitioner to reveal 'how people within a particular setting create meanings' (Cunliffe, 2008: 18)

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Leadership Paradox

- Leadership seen by organisations as key source of competitive advantage
- Major UK Bodies (CMI / CEML / CIMA / Leitch Report) agree UK's competitive future rests on addressing perceived leadership performance shortfall
- Billions spent on leadership development
- Programmes dominated by formal intervention approaches offering universal 'truisms' about leadership despite questions on their efficacy and very limited evidence of returns on investment



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Shadow of certainty



- Predominant approach to leadership and leadership development is positivistic
 - Efforts to prove theories that can be replicated over time
 - Efforts to find universal solutions to complex contextualised problems
- Scholarly consensus that we learn to lead through naturalistic experiences that occur over a long period of time
- Despite this growing acceptance there is a dearth of in-depth qualitative research

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